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Riding the Bear

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Consider this a testimony to *Ursus arctos*. I have ridden the great brown bear. The language written in its body and behavior penetrates the deepest recesses of my being, “nudges my imagination,” enters my dreams, and carries me to greater understanding. Each morning it draws me into the possibility of its presence in the high country surrounding my cabin. Each night *Ursa major* circles the starry sky framed by my window and helps me navigate dark waters. Seen through the lens of Eastern mythology, the bear is my “vehicle,” a companion animal such as Hindu deities rode on transformative journeys. The great brown bear, *Ursus arctos*, is my “living metaphor” and my “vehicle.”

Through the millennia we have become accustomed to watching and avoiding bears. In the past, when we were sharing the same food and terrain, it was necessary to do so in order to survive. We still watch bears carefully, but for different reasons, some of which are deeply psychological. Not human, yet faintly familiar, the bear arouses in us feelings we reserve for fellow beings, including the ambivalence we often feel toward those we admire but can’t quite trust. Notwithstanding scientific explanation, its extraordinary adaptation for sleeping through the darkest months astounds us.

In the Greater Yellowstone Bioregion where I reside, newspapers report the number of cattle or sheep killed by bears. A marauding or mauling bear that is identified, relocated, or killed makes the headlines. At the same time conservationists struggle to keep the grizzly’s endangered status, and animal rights activists protest its hunting. Meanwhile,

ordinary people of all persuasions gather along roadsides in parks whenever a bear appears. Formerly an object of torment, the bear persists in modern culture as a vicious threat and a cuddly friend. But in the now forgotten past, it was lord of the animals, had super human qualities, heard everything that was said, and sustained itself in winter merely by licking its paws. Most importantly, its life cycle exemplified spiritual renewal: it descended into the underground during the darkest time and emerged with spring and light and new life.

In this self-sufficient, technological society, are bears still significant to our lives? What difference would it make if they disappeared from the face of the earth? These questions come out of limited personal experience but deep reflection on the extraordinary explanations supporting the significance of the bear to Northern Hemisphere peoples offered by the late Paul Shepard.

Before his death, Paul admitted to having spent most of the last twenty years of his life in an intermittent meditation on the bear. With him for the last ten of those years, I can verify that overriding interest. Following his path to the bear, however, is like tracing its circuitous foraging path each day. Paul was not an ethologist, a scientist who studies the behavior of animals, he was a human ecologist, one who uncovers the relationships of humans to their environment, including its creatures. After spending the first twenty years of life questioning the origins of our environmental perception, in mid-life Paul shifted to hunters and gatherers. As he attempted to reconstruct their original orientation to the earth, he began to see the importance of our evolutionary helpmates, those Others, the many animals with whom we share our ecological past. He next set out to trace our evolutionary association with one of these “kindred spirits.” The bear, our companion in evolution who shares our omnivorous view of the world, was, of course, the leading candidate.

As with his other studies, Paul’s research on the bear surprised him with its many linguistic links. He found over forty meanings of “bear” and many words like *bier*, *barn*, *burden*, *bring*, *bright*, and *bereave* that showed etymological connections. Paul had previously concluded that humans devised the fundamentals for speech, song, dance, and performance by mimicking animals. He now conjectured that the term “bear” came into use at a time when language was just being born, a time when close attention to bears was essential for survival. In those days words were in short supply, so we used animals to convey the meanings for which we had no vocabulary. The bear was then, as it is now, the most charismatic of all the large animals—the most visible,

the most feared, the most respected—the one whose every movement grabbed our attention, penetrated our consciousness, and conveyed meaning. The one most like us. In his last years, Paul was intrigued by the bear as guide, messenger, and healer, told in stories and art based on its ecology. Like the bear, Paul was a metaphysician of sorts, yet the message of the bear is difficult for me to fathom. It requires that I embrace the animate bear itself in order to penetrate its meaning.

After his death, I was occupied with his papers, editing and publishing his last manuscripts and organizing his archives. In the process, I set aside his work on the bear. At the end of one summer of such work, I decided to delve into this material. During September I typed transcripts of Paul's many talks on the bear. As I listened and typed in the loft of my cabin, the sun sank lower in the south. Aspens on the butte turned from gold to gray when strong winds blew their leaves away. Willows along the ditch banks and the Hoback River took on burnished hues. Flaming ground maples in Hoback Canyon and golden willow torches along the Snake River went out. By October the landscape was the color of buckskin.

It was raining hard the morning I packed my car with down sleeping bag, winter clothes, snacks for survival, and bear spray. I had been looking forward with great anticipation to meeting friends in Yellowstone. My head was swirling with Paul's words and voice. I needed grounding; I needed real bears. As I packed, the great dark cloud hanging over the Hoback Basin descended upon me. I suddenly felt old and alone. I was weeping as I locked the cabin and headed down the road. The Grand Tetons were cloaked in mist as I proceeded teary-eyed along their base. In Yellowstone Park where an under-story of saturated mauves and crimsons back-dropped the white and black memorials to the great fire, the colors were heart wrenching. Descending into Mammoth, I maneuvered the hairpin curves cautiously, wary of the ease with which I could miss a turn. And I crept slowly over the high bridge that crosses the Yellowstone River trying my best to ignore the dark reaches below.

My friends Bernie Krause, a bio-acoustic master who has recorded the sounds of thousands of habitats, and Katherine Krause, an invaluable work partner and helpmate, met me at Soda Butte. In the warmth of their van and friendship my loneliness eased. We drove back down the road past wildlife watchers, took a turn-off, and hiked a trail pock-marked with wolf and bear scat, overturned rocks, and diggings. On the crest of a ridge, under a sheltering Douglas fir filled with playful Canada jays, we scanned the landscape that dropped into the multi-

colored Grand Canyon below. With no bears or wolves visible, we headed back to my car. Darkness descended as I trailed their van past bugling bull elk and their harems. After a good meal in a tiny cafe in Cook City, we went to the motel and said goodnight. My room was cold, and I was exhausted. I cranked up the heat, spread my sleeping bag over the covers, and hopped into bed. In the warm cocoon of my body heat, I soon fell sound asleep. I had a dream.

Bernie, Kat, and I were attending a lecture on bears. The man who was to give the talk walked in with a huge bundle wrapped in a bear skin that he placed on a table and began to unfold. He explained that instead of lecturing on bears he had decided it would be more useful if we ate the bear he had just killed and roasted. So we gathered around and began eating, picking up the pieces of meat with our fingers. We ate on and on and on, never seeming to get our fill of the delicious, tender, succulent meat. Embedded in the meat I kept finding bones, big beautiful bones, smooth as ivory and luminescent as pearl. A long bone that seemed to be a penis bone, an oosik, as it is called in Alaska; another that was wishbone shaped only thicker that looked somewhat like a butterfly; a lovely spiral-shaped disc; and a bone shaped like a ladder. As I plucked them out I tried to fit them into my knowledge of anatomy to determine their function but none seemed to fit. The bear skin was rather motley and was set to the side. I picked it up and wrapped it around me as I ate on. Suddenly, like a door slamming shut, our stomachs could not hold another morsel. The man, seeing this, announced that we could take anything that remained. "Anything"? I asked. "Yes, anything." Since no one else seemed interested, I took the bones in my arms and wrapped the skin around me. They infused me with a sense of security and well being.

The next day we sought bugling elk for Bernie's recordings. In late afternoon we joined other animal watchers and were rewarded with grizzly and black bears and the Druid wolf pack feeding on a dead moose. Stopping for every moving creature, I took most of the following day to drive home. I was blessed with more bear sightings: A mother black bear and two cubs along the roadside preparing for hibernation focused solely on berry eating. A grizzly mother and her two cubs moving across a ridge, overturning rocks, grazing on moths and digging for roots. A huge lone grizzly, impatient with being watched as it snacked along the roadside, suddenly loped across the highway directly in front of my car and vanished into the forest. Down the road I stopped to watch moose in final stages of courtship as they vied for a place in a wallow that the bull had dug and profused with

urine and scent. They looked spent but satiated as if they, too, had been eating bear meat.

My childhood home was a sheep ranch in southwestern Wyoming with meadows, clumps of cottonwoods, and willows scattered along the Hamsfork River that meandered through it, an oasis in a vast expanse of sage brush/ bunch grass steppe. A shy, skinny girl born between two gregarious sisters, I occupied the edge, listening and learning. I loved adult conversation, especially the on-going dialogue between my mother and father. He was a poor Italian immigrant without any schooling; she of immigrant Italian homesteaders, the responsible oldest child in a family of nine and with only a smattering of eighth grade education. Together they talked their way through devastating depression and drought, debts and deaths, two aliens contriving together a way of life that would be acceptably American, but was, as I learned later traveling in their homeland, very Italian.

One summer day after returning from a visit to the sheep herds on our forest allotment in the Wyoming Range, my father was reporting back to my mother who was working in the kitchen preparing for visitors expected the next day. Dominick, the camp jack, was treed by a bear that had been killing sheep. After the bear finally went away, Dominick got his gun, tracked it down, and killed it. As my father talked he unwrapped a huge roast, not a leg of lamb as my mother anticipated, but leg of bear. Bear? My mother was doubtful. Although her mother, a Piedmontess, had taught her the art of cooking delicious meals from simple ingredients, she had never cooked bear meat. My father assured her that it would be very good, but he warned her that they shouldn't tell the guests, relatives who would be arriving that day, what they were eating until they had finished the meal.

The next afternoon sitting at the big round table in the breezy dining room used only on hot summer days, I watched the guests with interest as I ate slowly and thoughtfully, rolling each tasty morsel on my tongue. When everyone had finished and was thanking my mother for the delicious meal, one of them asked as an afterthought. "By the way, Tillie, what kind of meat was that?" "Bear." "BEAR?" A long silent pause was followed by animated conversation on the bear and the sheep herder, bears in general, and eating the bear. It was obvious to me, even at the age of about ten that this was no ordinary event, but one to which deeply felt prohibitions were attached.

Other than brief encounters with bears in fairy tales, as teddy bears, and occasional real Yellowstone bears (Ranger Rick and Yogi had not yet

come into being), I had no other memorable bear encounters as a child. As a young mother with children, before bear maulings were common, we camped without tents and watched a black bear run through our camp one morning, and we often heard bears noisily over-turning garbage cans in campgrounds near Yellowstone Park during the night. But later in life as a professor at the University of Utah, when I was struggling with the politics of our department, I had my first remarkable bear dream:

With a child in my arms, I was walking along a ridge crest with tundra falling away below. A man walked at my side. Two yearling bear cubs were following close behind. The man, seeing that I was watching them warily, assured me I had nothing to fear. It was twilight, but suddenly an undulating, green curtain of light spread across the sky. I turned to the man and in his stead was a magnificent bear with close-set eyes and a head so large that it filled my entire field of vision. Standing there together—he on his hind legs swaying ever so slightly—we watched the spectacle of light.

Months later at Candlemas, half-way between the winter solstice and spring equinox, I received a note from Paul Shepard whom I had never met, but from whom I had ordered his remaindered books for my classes. He would have a few hours lay-over in Salt Lake City on his way to Jackson Hole, Wyoming where he was presenting a humanities symposium and wondered if I might meet him at the airport for lunch. I wrote back offering him a stipend if he would come one day early and speak to my graduate seminar where we were mulling over his recent book, *Nature and Madness*. He consented, and, after his lecture that evening, I took him to dinner with friends. When he mentioned he was just completing a book on bears, they asked me to tell him about my dream, which I had been repeating to everyone. He listened intently as I repeated it, and, when I had finished, he looked at me with very blue eyes and said simply, “Well, Flo, that says it all.” I hadn’t the slightest idea what he meant. He left the next morning for Jackson and from there to India for a four month Fulbright lectureship.

A few weeks later, Walter Prothero, a former student, professional hunter, and outdoor writer, stopped by my office with an offer to accompany him to the Arctic in late summer. Longing to see the Alaska landscape, yet terribly afraid of bears, I agreed.

Paul returned in June from India and tracked me down at my sister’s cabin in the Hoback Basin in Wyoming where my grandson and I were enjoying a brief vacation, he fishing and me resting after a hectic

quarter. Paul stayed on for several days, and he left assuring me this time he would be in touch. Our friendship deepened during the next months. As the time approached for my Arctic trip, Paul was silent. Although sensing his disapproval, I couldn't turn back.

So at the end of the summer, I stood on a sandbar on the upper Sheenjek River in the National Arctic Wildlife Refuge quaking in my "Bean boots." Our gear, which we had quickly unloaded from the plane that flew us in, was stacked in a heap and included a 50 gallon steel drum filled with the provisions I had brought according to Walt's instructions. We were 350 miles north of the Arctic Circle. The bush pilot, who has since died in a crash, had taken off leaving instructions about where to meet him in a little over three weeks. The sand bar was covered with grizzly and wolf tracks. Why, I asked myself, was I taking part in this hair-brained adventure?

I'm still not sure how I survived the trek into the Brooks Range following that Pleistocene hunter. Thankfully, I did, and I carry with me memories of a lovely, weathered, pearl-gray landscape sometimes with grizzlies silhouetted on the horizon, their snouts lifted to pick up scents. We stayed in the high country for ten days living on a mountain sheep that Walt shot and then returned to the Sheenjek River and began our float to my pick-up point at Lobo Lake. One evening, after hiking solo all day, Walt walked into camp and came toward me with something in his hand. "Here," he said, "give this to your friend." In my hand he placed a bear's bloody penis.

The next day, along with helping Walt prepare the bear skin, I boiled the penis and removed and cleaned the *oosik* that I would have prepared as a pendant for Paul when I got back to Fairbanks. That evening we cooked the first of the bear meat. Although it was as delicious as the bear my mother had prepared, I had a very difficult time swallowing it. After reading *The Sacred Paw* (given to me by Paul for the trip, several times from cover to cover, I understood more fully the significance of the prohibition I sensed as a child. We were eating a sacred being, but we didn't know the ceremonies.

After this last declaration of independence on my part, I took up with Paul Shepard for better or worse. He found in me a willing traveling companion, and in the next years we journeyed repeatedly in search of further evidence of the importance of animals in human lives. More particularly, "old honey paw" was always on his mind. We began in Britain. After a month of traveling in the northernmost reaches, wandering among standing stones and staring into barrows, we settled

into a flat in London. It was then I observed Paul for the first time in his serendipitous research mode. He had wide-ranging interests stemming from an interdisciplinary academic background, and was blessed with abilities not unlike those of a hunter. He was a good tracker and patient in the face of frustration. Keen selective vision helped him pick up on multiple clues. He had the gifts of phenomenal memory and focused attention. His long list of books, artifacts, and art objects for investigation never grew shorter; as he crossed off items, he just kept adding more. At the British Museum, which was his base, he was like a marauding bear ransacking the great halls for significant icons that he studied with absolute concentration. He poured over illuminated manuscripts, and in the grand reading room with its ethereal blue domed ceiling, he sat in leather chairs at polished desks assiduously reading and taking notes.

Later in Greece, Sicily, and Italy, with a carefully marked map at hand, we visited ancient worship sites, focusing especially on Artemis and Demeter temples. Paul was convinced of the “bearishness” of both these goddesses and was seeking direct evidence in the iconography. The fascinating search took us to places like Eleusis where rites to Demeter were celebrated. There we sat on the edge of a minor temple to Artemis and looked up the pavement to where great gates opening into a cave had left their mark in the stone. Processions of priestesses and holy women came here walking all the way from Athens, carrying offerings and preparations for the sacred “mysteries” of death and rebirth reenacted in the temple. At Brauron, bronze dragonflies danced in the sun by the spring and standing pillars marked the place where young girls in saffron robes dressed as bears celebrated puberty rites before Artemis.

Other than a few bears decorating a sarcophagus here and there, and illustrations of Callisto being changed into a bear and banished into the sky, we found very few bears in Greece or Southern Italy. Nonetheless, convinced of the bear’s lingering presence, Paul surmised that as bears disappeared from the Mediterranean landscape, they were replaced by human deities, the gods, goddesses, and cultural heroes in classical Greek mythology, later co-opted by the Romans. Etymologically, Artemis leads to bears and she was from Arcadia, which was known as bear country. As midwife, huntress, and virgin she embodied the ambiguous roles, androgynous as well as maternal, that the bear suggests. Demeter also has bear leanings. She was the terrible mother who lost her daughter, Persephone, to the underworld, and in her great grief, sent the earth into perpetual winter. Finally relenting, she permitted spring to return only when Persephone was allowed to come

back to the middle world each year. Her story reenacts bear hibernation and the renewal of spring. And the bear lingers in mythologies of heroes like Salmoxis, Odysseus, and Orpheus who imitated the themes of death and renewal through banishment and exile and return as well as by their descent into caves for fasting and meditation and enlightened emergence.

Farther north in the Italian Alps in the Val di Non, my father's homeland, we found the sanctuary of San Romedio, which delighted Paul no end. Here in a cul-de-sac on a high limestone promontory overlooking a jagged gorge forged by a rushing stream, a hermit monk once lived with a bear he had tamed. The many stairs, leading to the chapel at the very top of the structure where a picture of the saint with the bear hangs over the altar, are lined with crutches and tokens of thanksgiving offered by supplicants in testimony to their miraculous cures. The bones of the bear and of St. Romedio are venerated in crypts and, through a grill in the floor, one can look down into the cave where they once lived. Down below along the stream, European brown bears are kept in a sanctuary.

On into Switzerland, at Drachenloch, high above the valley floor, we looked up at caves where cave bear remains were discovered, Caves such as these that contain remains of the great cave bear, *Ursus spaleus*, that roamed the Earth for almost 300,000 years, have been found throughout Western Europe. It became extinct with many other animals at the end of the Pleistocene about 10,000 years ago. According to experts such as Valerius Geist, the cave bear, about the size of a polar bear, was mostly vegetarian and had evolved very large molars and powerful jaws to grind roots to accommodate its carnivore digestive system. Its enormous canines suggest that it was fiercely territorial and used these for threat in defense and mating rather than for preying on other animals. They hibernated in caves in the winter and in the spring, followed the greening. Ancient humans used the vacated caves for shelter. Over the millennia great numbers of bones accumulated as bears died in hibernation, a critical time in the life cycle when mortality is the highest. Paul, like other researchers, saw human intentionality in the placement of these skulls and bones in the caves, but this supposition is controversial. He nonetheless was convinced that for thousands of years Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons worshipped the bear as a divine being. The goddess, he insisted, was created later out of patriarchic agriculture's obsession with procreation and fertility.

In Berne, the great bear city, we found a profusion of bear images dating back to Medieval times, in portals to the museum and stained

glass, in pedestals and paintings, chalices and vases, and flags, crests, seals, and coats of arms. European bears are kept in the famous bear pit, a stone basin twelve meters wide and four meters deep, where bears were fought. Amidst this profusion of bear images, Paul found particular significance in one artifact, Dea Artio, a small bronze archeological object, found in 1832, which has been dated around the second century A. D. The object was found in an ancient Gallo-Roman villa in what may have been a chapel or a temple of a religious group. A seated statuette of a goddess holding a plate of fruit is offering it to a large bear facing her. Paul believed that this object showed the important shift from belief in animal power to humanized deities who had absorbed the sacredness of the bear. This artifact, he insisted, acknowledges the transition from bear deity to the human form.

Later we traveled in India seeking depictions of animals in Hindu temples and religious sites. Animals were everywhere, both in representations and in the flesh. Monkeys chattered and scampered across walls and entrances to temples where, with a gentle tap of their trunks, elephants bestowed blessings on the bowed heads of pilgrims. Although the bear was not a prominent figure, one of my most poignant memories was seeing a muzzled and leashed bear standing on its hind feet by its master begging along a roadside. This debasing sight, emblematic of the abuse we have heaped upon bears, filled me with sadness. In the not so distant past, we placed bears in pits where they had to fight bulls, lions, and dogs to the death. And today we chase and tree them or bait and kill them for sport. We make circus animals and beggars of them. Because of the healing qualities of their organs and body fluids, we cage them and tether them with tubes as if they were machines. And we kill them and use their parts to enhance our health and sexual pleasures. But even in these debasing roles the bear's superiority stands against our addictions and dependencies. Our reliance upon them for our well-being and gratification attests to their power, not ours.

In Scandinavia in the fall of 1993, when Paul's last explanation of *The Others* was in its finishing stages, as was his last statement on hunters and gatherers, in *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, he became more focused on the bear. After consulting with experts on the bear cult in Norway and Sweden, we found in a museum in Lulea, Sweden, a wonderful illustration of the *Bjornfesten* by Ossian Elgstrom prepared in the early '30s that sets out the very complex steps in this slain bear festival: the discovery of the hibernating bear in its den, the ceremony of its killing, the complicated cross-gender celebration when the bear's spirit is invited to participate, and, finally, the return of the skull, bear

bones, and skin to the mountains where sites are appropriately decorated.

The slain bear ceremony, set out in this graphic form, astonished me with its symbolism and meaning. About 10,000 years ago when climate changed, grazing herds decreased, and settlements became more permanent, harsh winters must have been difficult for foraging people. The discovery of a hibernating bear, much less dangerous than when roaming about, must have been a motherload, a great store of fat and meat, bones for implements, and a wonderfully warm pelt, at the time when these things were so needed. In those days, as is still the case today, hunts were reenacted around campfires in preparation for the new hunt to take place. It isn't difficult to imagine how old hunting stories retold from year to year were embellished and reinterpreted by wise elders. The mysteries of death and the life of the soul must have been a problem for our ancestors, just as they are for us. The same existential questions plagued them: Why are we here and what happens to us after death? Some sort of great creator seems necessary to set this whole stew into motion. But how did we as individuals and as a group come into being?

Cosmologies, stories of how the world began, grew out of such questions as well as origin myths, that explain the beginning of particular tribes with their emerging heroes and hunts. Slain bear rituals rendered these stories into one grand ceremony of renewal. With the bear as the model, it isn't surprising that similar stories and celebrations developed circumpolarly among people separated by great distances. The common theme, coming out of the life cycle of the bear, was that out of darkness and death comes life and renewal.

Integral to the ceremonies was a myth about a woman who marries a bear. It goes something like this: A young woman is either abducted or seduced and carried away by a bear. She lives with him in a cave and has children that are half bear and half human. When her brothers finally come to her rescue, her bear husband accepts that he is to die and offers his life, but he first instructs his wife in the ceremonies that must be followed to honor his death.

Modern folk tales with similar themes grew out of these myths. A young woman, sometimes poor and sometimes a princess, is carried away by a bear/man, a bewitched prince, and she lives with him in a cave where she gives birth to bear children. Eventually, dissatisfied, she escapes. After facing many travails and tests, she reunites with him, he is returned to his manhood, and they live happily ever after. Norwegian

folktales like “White King Valemon” and “East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” and other variations told throughout Europe emerged, and in the United States “White Bear Whittington” found its way into the American Ozarks. Reading these tales, I now understand what Paul meant when he said about my dream, “that says it all.” In that first bear dream there were the leading characters found throughout the world in bear myths and folktales about the woman who marries a bear.

As the bear disappeared from Europe, the theme of the slain bear persisted in Greco-Roman mythology and was passed on in folk tales and fairy stories into modern times. The parallels with the Christ’s story are unmistakable: Communion wherein the flesh and blood of the Lord brings new life, or when his dead body is resurrected have a bearish quality about them. The emphasis, Paul conjectured, has changed in modern religions. In celebrations of the slain bear, the bear was honored for bestowing food and spirit in the continuing great cycle of life in a difficult but “gifting” world. In modern religions our planet is seen as a place of tests and travails and the emphasis is on escaping to somewhere else, a garden paradise of eternal happiness away from the Earth’s dirt and grime. But the bear persists metaphorically as well as in iconography. Nursing Madonna’s are the most familiar art object in galleries. They once had bear heads. And our modern Madonna’s as well as the holy family are often associated with caves or grottoes, the hang-outs of bears. The celebration of Candlemas on February 2 and the feast of Saint Blais on February 3 are Christian observations that followed pagan rituals of the coming of light that also honored the bear’s emergence from hibernation in southern Europe.

On another cold cloudy day in October, home from the doctor’s office, Paul and I stood in the hallway and embraced tearfully. Incredulous as it seemed, he had just been diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer and had only months to live. At the same time that this tragic event put an end to his search for the mythological bear, it brought into focus the dimensions of bear biology that had brought spiritual renewal to our primal ancestors. During the last months of his life, Paul visited a shaman in New Mexico and wrote about that experience:

Looking to the bear will not restore me to those distant ancestors who preceded by hundreds of millennia all that negotiation and debasement of the spirit, but it may open my heart and mind to the double gift of the bear as feast and physician. In its role as the killed and renewing deity, whose grease, once tasted is supremely relished over any other “fat of the land,” and whose wildness reminds me of my wildness, the bear sustains me. The bear gives physical sustenance and spiritual healing. . . . Recently in search of health, I entered a

native healer's house. In a firelit room, he was ready in traditional regalia, surrounded by a rich array of paraphernalia. The ensuing smoke, teas, chants, dances, and songs washed over my senses. As the hours passed I drifted in the nexus between physical body and spiritual reality . . . Then I was aware of being embraced by dark, hairy arms . . . In my ear was an unmistakable snuffling. The twofold gift of the bear was fulfilled.

The bear slumbered in me until I met Paul Shepard. Like the new relationship with him that demanded such commitment, it entered with such force I had to look away in order to keep my footing. And lately, as I've struggled with Paul's last writings on the bear, I also struggle to save myself from extinction. I have to resist putting my whole being into the study. Time is running out for me; I have my own life to live and I must make choices. And good friends have been no help. They keep asking me, actually badgering me, "Flo, where's your next book? You need to do your *own* writing." Insight to my dilemma came to me recently in another dream.

I was in a rather dilapidated house that seemed to be going back to earth, as most human-made structures are destined to do. It was one huge room and I was trying to bring the place to order which was a great task since in each of the corners were bears in flimsy cage-like structures. The bears were not happy about being contained in this way. They were roaring, huffing, and gnashing their teeth, striking at the structures and setting up a ferocious clammer. Busy with householding tasks, I worked away in the center of this cacophony, ignoring them as I might a child having a temper tantrum. A man approached me and warned that I had better pay attention to the bears. So I left my work, went the rounds of the bears and lectured each in no uncertain terms to be good, lie down, and stop the noise. They bared their teeth, threatened and feigned attack, but eventually settled down.—except for the last bear who was especially recalcitrant. It resisted my commands, would not be contained, and finally broke out, came charging at me, and caught me tight in a terrific bear hug, growling and snarling all the while. I talked to it gently, but the grip remained firm. Only after I had stopped resisting its hold did it settle into a murmuring repose and release me—and then I didn't want to leave.

I have to listen to my dreams. Seen through a Freudian lens they represent erotic fantasies or sexual repression. Modern scientific analysis explains them as a matter of brain chemistry, a natural way our bodies have evolved in times of stress to consolidate our thinking and heal our taxed minds and emotions while we are resting in sleep. Jung's

collective unconscious offers still another explanation in terms of the universal content of dreams. My dreams were undoubtedly about me and my present state, but, I insist, they were also about bears. That last bear that held me tight was not a bewitched prince or Paul—it was a bear. In our culture, the bear in its phenomenal, biological reality is something, but it also means and stands for something. *Ursus Arctos* is a magnificent wild creature, but it is also a primordial sign-image, a “living metaphor” that brings to bear the meaning of life for our culture so preoccupied with death.

Helen Keller said that at the time she was swimming in a dark sea of chaotic emotions with no sense of herself and the world, her dreams brought her hope and introduced possibilities. I resonate with her explanation for in my darkest hours, my bear dreams explain the bear as well as where I am. They help me see possibilities and in that way bring hope, a hope arising not from a human constructed world but from the wildness that still resides in me.

Between my bear dreams and Paul’s mythologyzing, is there a middle ground where we and real bears can meet in equanimity? I think not. But rather than stop on that pessimistic note, I ask you to come with me. For a moment let’s ride the bear and let it take us to where we need to go, into the high mountains. On some shady slope, let’s dig in, let the snow cover us over, and meditate for a while. When spring awakens us, let’s emerge, enlightened—with a management plan for ourselves that follows all the good advice we’ve been giving. First of all, let’s get out of bear territory and give their habitat back to them. Let’s create zones and corridors that buffer and join their habitats so that their genes can mingle and remain viable and wild. And back in our homes, let’s follow mandates of simple living to curb our population and our greedy appetites. When we hunt bears, let’s kill them fairly and selectively and celebrate their meat with others in great thanksgiving for the full and glorious moments of life and death. And why not return the bones and skins to the wild and place their skulls in trees? This shouldn’t be too hard. We’ve been practicing it for millennia. What do we have to lose? If wilderness continues to be exploited and destroyed, the bear will surely vanish. If the bear goes, wildness will disappear from our earth, from our stories, and from our dreams. Such a tamed world would be no place at all.

Epilogue: After a sojourn in Montana, where I presented the above paper, I was tired as I caught my plane but full, as if I had been dining on bear meat once more. The news that we would first go to Great Falls before heading south upset me as I boarded the plane—but then I

remembered the Missouri River. Airborne only a short time, glued to the window, I saw the Rocky Mountains level off and the Missouri begin to meander, a golden ribbon glistening in the setting sun. After a short stop we were airborne once more, heading south. Darkness descended. Little clusters of lights flickered on here and there below us in the great expanse of forest and mountains buried deep in snow. Down there somewhere bears in bough-lined dens, slightly aroused yet drowsy, were turning over and going back to sleep. The three worlds lay before me in exquisite detail: the upper world, the sky, the breath of life, the medium for spirituality, for birds; the middle world, and the planes and mountains where lives are lived and life cycles completed; the underworld, a holding place for denning, for the dark recesses of our psyches, and for rest after death. As we approached Salt Lake City, multi-colored lights glistened through jagged rents in grey clouds that blanketed the basin. Just before we dipped into them for our landing, I spotted *Ursa Major* in the north sky, tracing its interminable course around Polaris, staying our course, turning the world.